

TIME GOES ONE WAY - AGAINST THE CLASSIFICATION OF ART

By [Joelle Khoury](#)

"...the present time...ourselves ...Chuff, chuff, chuff went the machine. Time was passing...Change had to come...or there'd have been yards and yards of Papa's beard, of mama's knitting" (Virginia Woolf).

I was asked, for the occasion of a conference about free expression (in music), as a composer and performer of non-commercial/ non traditional music, and as a woman composer, to speak on the following topics: women composers and/or modernity versus tradition (in Lebanon). Although both these topics are pertinent, they are mere elements of a broader problem: what makes an individual, and what should be the place and the importance of individuality in art. For surely when we speak of freedom we speak of the individual.

I will start with a little true story by which I was touched and that I was never able to forget. It is about a great teacher and a once friend of mine. Let's call him Smith. Jazz and classical composer/pianist, renowned poet in the Washington DC area, chess player, speaker of six languages, who happened to be black and enjoy reciting Shakespeare sonnets while striding along the streets of black residential areas in D.C. When I met Smith, he was the house pianist at the greatest jam session in D.C., at a pub that I will not name and which by now has been torn down. He was an unbelievable musician; all young musicians I knew dreamed of getting close to him, but an aura of strangeness surrounded him and somehow chased people away. I was curious about the man and started a little inquiry. I thus learned that he had spent some time in a psychiatric institution, which in a way made him sort of uncommunicative. Later on I got to become close to him, and he told me some of his mishaps: he had supposedly punched some black guy who followed him around very often, bugging him, calling him "whitey", for no other apparent reason than Smith's liking of Shakespeare and dressing in very elegant but western manner. To make things worse, the judge got annoyed by Smith's arrogance when the latter had replied in Latin in the court room while he was being asked if guilty. I must add that his white piano teachers were bothered with a black kid who played Beethoven so well. So who is Smith? Who are we to be! Are we sometimes guilty until proven innocent? Who is the jury and what are the rules?!

I hope this story makes it clear that I do not wish to pit West against East, light against dark-colored skin, popular art against so-called academic music, or new against old or vice-versa. For freedom of expression involves the possibility of one using whatever means one wishes or can to express oneself. As Francis Bacon says in an interview about contemporary art: "Now that in the art world all is accepted and possible...that there is no longer any possibilities for art "schools"..."art has now become a mere game...one can only react to certain situations accordingly to one's own nervous system".¹ We shall not understand Bacon's statement simplistically.

From the moment a human being is conceived, he is open to the outside. The outside is taken in. The wider and the most varied the outside is the more information a person has to process. In our modern world, because of the expanding communication systems, the outside is becoming wider at a vertiginously increasing rate. Let's take the example of an average individual in the city of Beirut. The person auditively bathes in three basic languages: Arabic, French and English. Turn on the television: Lebanese drama, Egyptian drama, French sentimentality, Indian musicals, CNN, Arte, Mezzo, cowboys and politicians ... Go to school: world history, Phoenicians....; Walk on the street: blue jeans, veils and shorts, cigars, cigarettes and water pipes...Listen to the radio: Lebanese *dabkeh* and rap, blues and jazz, pop and rock, Jacques Brel, Fairouz, Oum Koulthoum...Some may enjoy reading: Albert Camus and Shakespeare...maybe Khalil Gibran (who himself had read Nietzsche and admired the work of William Blake)...Go to the restaurant: steak and *tabbooleh*, taggiatelli and *samboussek*, arak and red wine.....The example was Lebanese, but it goes the same all over now.

Addressing the relevant question of **why we, Lebanese, speak English or French** is not what I here intend to do. Yet, it amazes me, as it shocks numerous Lebanese artists I know when, after displaying their work or as they are seeking support for their productions, to be sometimes implicitly, but very often explicitly asked the following: why don't you include *dabkeh* in your music or oud,² why do you quote Virginia Woolf or Albert Einstein, how come your films are inspired by Fellini, shouldn't your photographs include more veiled women or villagers riding donkeys or details of the Lebanese war...? The questions are unending yet the message is the same. It was once crudely and yet maybe innocently put to me: *why not mess with your own patrimony...* (and leave Goethe alone!).

¹ David, Sylvester (1996), *Entretiens avec Francis Bacon*; Geneve: Skira.

² Walid Gholmieh, composer, conductor and President of the Lebanese National Conservatory was once invited to perform one of his symphonies abroad. He was ironically asked why he didn't include Oud in his orchestration. His answer was: "I will when you include the balalaika" (not for lack of respect for either instrument).

Roots are, we can't deny it, but so are we: "...the present time...ourselves ...Chuff, chuff, chuff went the machine. Time was passing...Change had to come...or there'd have been yards and yards of Papa's beard, of mama's knitting".³ Art is not a dusty archive register, a portrait signed by Rubens is not a passport photo. The greatness of Velazquez' *Menines* does not lie in the resemblance with the real characters. The artistic statement is a point of view involving freedom. It uses reality as a launching pad yet never sticks to it. All means are permitted, **including the use of tradition**. Living in an era of openness, one has to face and digest a multitude of aesthetics. Our present is openness. The *blues* is becoming natural to the Lebanese, as *reggae* is to Europeans. Soon there will be as many British women doing the belly dance as there are Lebanese. One of the greatest interpreters of JS Bach was Canadian. A piece of art belongs to anyone who wishes to experience it, to be transported by it. "And what if the thing transporting you doesn't come from your neighbourhood!"⁴

You cannot teach Shakespeare to Indians and then forbid them to really understand and appreciate him. The assimilation of the "other", of what is supposedly *different* from oneself can be deep and real, it does not always stop at ridiculous mimicking and gimmicking. As we all know, it happens that we get along better with a friend than with a close relative. It's like having a preference for a color or a smell or a taste. Freedom implies choice. Don't many Americans eat Chinese food now? Now the world offers us more choices, the universe has become more suggestive. "Selective Affinities" as Goethe might put it. Each according to his own *nervous system* echoes Bacon. All means are sacred when the goal is right, confirms Kandinsky.

There are numerous reasons why an artist may decide, consciously or intuitively, to use particular means of expression. These techniques are all considered legitimate, except the ones primarily aiming at financial gain and/or popularity. The idea of *commercial art* is in itself a contradiction. If we believe art is nurtured by and seeks freedom, how can this freedom be sustained if a certain market dictates what the artist must express and how. Obligation and art don't go together. Art feeds on inner necessity.

And what does the market demand today? That a certain "type" of artist sticks to a certain "type" of music or style. What is this thing about types anyway, and categories? For the interesting statement in an art piece or what is really artistic about it lies in singularity and not in generality. Saying something *general* is like saying nothing at all. Generalities (in every day talk they might amount to *nice weather today*, or *hey! how is it going* – without listening to the answer) are usually fillers where one wants to avoid

³ Woolf, Virginia (2000), *Between The Acts*, London: Vintage

⁴ Byrne, David (1999), "I Hate World Music"; *The New York Times*, October 3.

serious discussion or when one has nothing to say. By pushing artists to produce alongside certain *sellable* categories, companies and individuals in charge of artistic industries create a world of disguised or false statements about personal as well as social identity. They castrate the artist as well as the public whose salvation lies in a way in the artist's hand, since most people are practically too busy to delve into certain regions of their own being. "In my experience, the use of the term world music is a way of dismissing artists or their music as irrelevant to one's own life. It's a way of relegating this "thing" into the realm of something exotic and therefore cute, weird but safe, because exotica is beautiful but irrelevant" .⁵ Art becomes a mere form of entertainment. Although we admit fun is nice and sometimes necessary, some of us believe art has a more elevated role. "The artist is the one in charge of pulling the heavy human chariot forward and up.....if art runs away from its task, this void cannot be filled. For no other power can replace art"⁶.

Going back to the fact that some of us non-western artists, who happen to have chosen not to make a display of our folk art at every public appearance, seem to be misjudged somehow: **What are we being accused of here?** Why should we just *mess* with our own patrimony and leave western culture alone?!

Some may argue: you are losing your roots, your traditions. My answer is: what was, when it really was, never ceases to be, one way or another. Also, the task of many scholars is researching, documenting, classifying and safely saving our traditions. Let us not deprive them of their job. My second answer is that traditions are not an abstract fixed idea, they are living practices and they move on. What is fixed is called history. An artist is not a historian. I must add that artists may freely make use of tradition when they feel the true inner urge to do so. Bela Bartok is one great example. He was able to capture the essence of folk music yet bring it alive by breathing into it something personal and new. Misuse and artificial use of tradition amount to prostituting and killing it.

Are we implicitly accused of theft? (The same could be said about Westerners making use of Oriental music). Are culture, information or education goods only bestowed upon us as long as they remain safely beyond our reach? Again, I believe it is now too late for any one group to claim exclusive proprietorship over one tradition, concept or style. Knowledge in the form of culture is out to be used by anyone feeling the urge to do so, hopefully in view of pushing things forward and up!

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Kandinsky, Vladimir: *Du Spirituel Dans L'Art Et Dans La Peinture En Particulier*, Paris: Folio

Identification with the winner? In Psychoanalysis they call it *identification with the aggressor*, but we are trying to be friendly and positive here. So let us imagine that some oriental artists unconsciously or consciously want to be *Western*, for the West seems to have taken over right now. Again we are not here to analyze anyone, just to defend freedom of expression. Many say Beethoven was a great composer because he hated his father so much, Billie Holiday a moving singer because her life had been miserable and Virginia Woolf such a creative writer because her childhood was so awkward. I should remind you all that so many miserable people run around all over, some end up mentally ill, yet they do not give birth to a single piece of art. So if the artist rightfully suffers some kind of identity problem, we wish him a quick recovery, but let us not evaluate the quality of his work based on his personal history.

As a conclusion, I ask myself the following: does a style or “manner” of expression express a specific thing? Can we express the same emotion using any style? Do certain ideas go more logically and easily with certain traditions? Do certain traditions imply specific points of view while other styles see the world from a different angle? Can we use the vocabulary of the past without falling into the obsolete? The relationship between **form and content** in art is a complex one and has often been debated. Some modern scholars agree to the idea that art has no content at all. Eduard Hanslick for example, a famous musicologist believes that: “there exists no universal, determinable relationship between a given feeling and a musical form”.⁷ We however, the general public, seem to *basically* agree upon deciding whether a musical piece is “sad” or “joyful”. The term *basically* is here meant literally, since emotions and ideas, are each a unique entity. Terminology such as *sad* or *joyful* simply reflects the fact that most humans can recognize hints of general tones of emotions in certain art pieces...something they can relate to, to a certain extent. Another question complicates matters a little further: are feelings a fixed thing? Technology seems to have gotten more sophisticated over the years. How about feelings and ideas? Thinkers such as Bergson and Kandinsky seem to believe that, if time is not an empty container – and therefore useless, if life somehow has a purpose, then new emotions are continuously being born, leading us into greater subtleness of vision. Life is not a series of morbid repetitions. Does this mean that there can be no repetition? That history and traditions are dead and must be discarded? That we can no longer enjoy Beethoven’s 9th symphony or relate to it? Not really. For what once was never ceases to be, it lives within us and pushes us forward. It is armed with what we already know that we try to

⁷ Braun: “A propos d’Eward Hanslick: le fond et la forme en musique”, in: *Cahier ses seminaires de philosophie* # 4.

advance. So how does this function, this marriage, when it does occur –and it always does since memory exists- between past and present?

In his article *Vers une metapsychologie de la creation*⁸, psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu differentiates between *artistic creation*, and what he calls simple *creativity*. While *creating* involves the responsibility of breaking the rules and opening up new paths, *creativity* implies a mere re-disposition of existing elements. For the purpose of meeting market demand, numerous artists have had to give up the *sublime* and stick to shallow forms of prettiness, elegantly (and sometimes less elegantly) re-disposing elements familiar to the ears and eyes. Who is to blame? Is it true that demand reflects the real desire of the public – who's often accused by producers as well as artists of being ignorant or unable to appreciate quality material? If that were the case, aren't we artists responsible for initiating the public to better quality? This task can become close to impossibly difficult since even a true artist has to survive...biologically.

The situation described above can run around in circles forever. It would be useless and unfair pointing the finger at any specific group and blaming them for all our evils. Nonetheless, becoming aware of a problem is a positive step towards improvement.

So we'll let each one do his thing, each according to his own nervous system, keeping in mind that what we are born into, who we are, who we believe to be, want to be or are perceived as are not easily conjugated. Yet we all love this thing called **ART!** So as my friend Smith used to enjoy saying, I will tell you: **"To the integrity of each and the unity of all!"**

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⁸ Anzieu, Didier: *Vers une metapsychologie de la creation*, in *Psychanalyse du genie createur*, Paris: Bordas.